BEYOND NOISE

VOICE THAT MATTERS

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COVER STORY

The Idea Called India

Who is writing the next chapter of India?

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Independence Day Message

Independence is our Legacy.

Service is our Choice.

As India marks its 79th Independence Day on 15 August 2026, we celebrate not only the hard-won freedom secured through extraordinary sacrifice but also the enduring responsibility of preserving it.

For those in uniform, service is a solemn oath to protect the nation's sovereignty. For every citizen, service is reflected in integrity, excellence, respect for the rule of law, and an unwavering commitment to the common good. The strength of a nation is measured not only by the vigilance at its borders but also by the character of its people.

The future of India will be shaped by citizens who choose duty over convenience, unity over division, and purpose over indifference. Let us honour the legacy of our freedom fighters by building an India that is stronger, more innovative, more compassionate, and worthy of the generations yet to come.

Jai Hind!

Lt Col Aman Singh,
Sena Medal (Gallantry)
Security Operations Specialist, DRDE

Editor's Note

Every Independence Day, we remember the sacrifices that gave us our freedom. We honour those who shaped our nation's history and celebrate the journey that brought us here. As we began working on this edition, however, one question stayed with us: Who is writing the next chapter of India?

The answer, we realised, cannot be found in a single profession, institution, or moment. It is found in countless people who quietly fulfil their responsibilities every day. Some make history. Most never appear in it. Yet together, they shape the nation we experience.

The stories in this edition explore that idea from different perspectives. They remind us that freedom is not only remembered through the past; it is also experienced in the present. It lives in ideas, in conversations, in responsibility, and in the quiet confidence that allows ordinary life to continue.

At Beyond Noise, we believe meaningful journalism is not only about reporting events. It is about recognising the people, values, and moments that often go unnoticed but leave a lasting impact on society.

As you turn these pages, we invite you to reflect not only on the freedom we inherited, but also on the role each of us plays in shaping its future.

Because history tells us who wrote the previous chapters.
The next chapter is being written now.

Happy Independence Day.

Sireesh Kondra
Editor
Beyond Noise

MORE THAN MEDALS

A TRIBUTE TO TEAM INDIA AT THE 2026 COMMONWEALTH GAMES, GLASGOW.

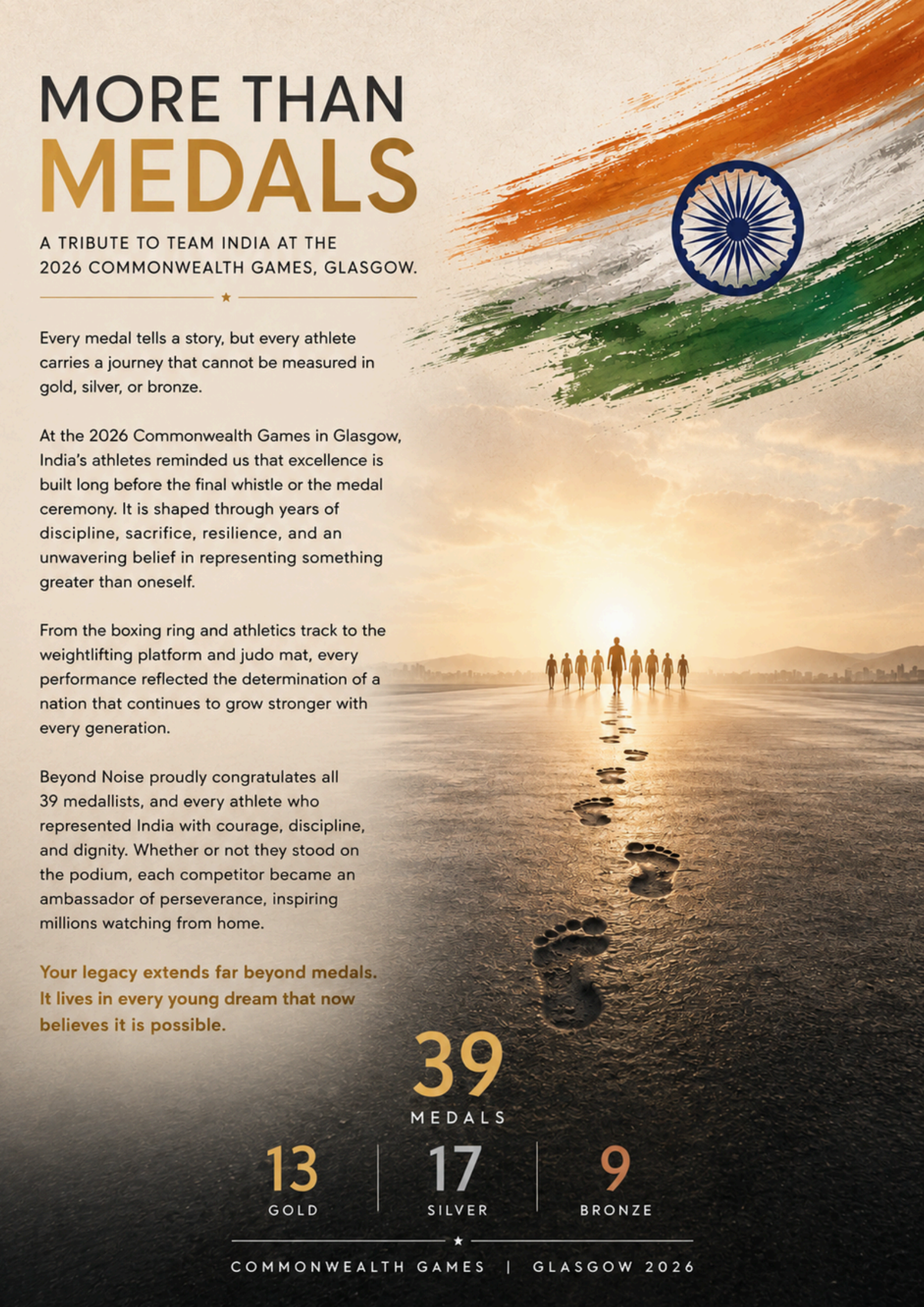
Every medal tells a story, but every athlete carries a journey that cannot be measured in gold, silver, or bronze.

At the 2026 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, India's athletes reminded us that excellence is built long before the final whistle or the medal ceremony. It is shaped through years of discipline, sacrifice, resilience, and an unwavering belief in representing something greater than oneself.

From the boxing ring and athletics track to the weightlifting platform and judo mat, every performance reflected the determination of a nation that continues to grow stronger with every generation.

Beyond Noise proudly congratulates all 39 medallists, and every athlete who represented India with courage, discipline, and dignity. Whether or not they stood on the podium, each competitor became an ambassador of perseverance, inspiring millions watching from home.

Your legacy extends far beyond medals. It lives in every young dream that now believes it is possible.



39
MEDALS

13	17	9
GOLD	SILVER	BRONZE

COMMONWEALTH GAMES | GLASGOW 2026

The Idea Called India

Who is writing the next Chapter of India

Every generation inherits a story it did not begin.

The roads we travel, the institutions we trust, the ideas we explore and the opportunities we pursue did not appear overnight. They were shaped by countless decisions, quiet acts of perseverance and an enduring belief that tomorrow could be better than today. We inherit more than a nation. We inherit unfinished work.

That may be the most remarkable thing about a country. It is never truly complete. Every generation receives what the previous one built, preserves what deserves to endure, improves what can be made better and leaves behind something for those who will come next. No generation begins from zero. No generation finishes the story.

When we look back, history naturally remembers its defining moments. They become milestones because they changed the direction of a nation. Yet every milestone rests upon foundations that are rarely seen. Before every breakthrough came years of patience. Before every transformation came countless small decisions. Before every chapter that history remembers were thousands of pages that history never recorded. That is how progress often unfolds. Quietly. Patiently. One step preparing the next.

A nation is not shaped only by extraordinary moments. It is shaped by everything that makes those moments possible.

An idea shared instead of kept. A responsibility accepted instead of avoided. A problem solved instead of ignored. A standard raised instead of maintained.

Many of these choices will never become headlines. They will never carry a name or a date. Yet they become part of something much larger than themselves. Over time, they strengthen institutions, inspire new ideas, create opportunities and widen the path for those who follow.

The future is rarely transformed in a single day.

It changes because countless people, often unknown to one another, choose to move in the same direction. That is why the story of India cannot be measured only by the events that define it. It must also be understood through the countless acts that sustain it.

Some build knowledge. Some build trust. Some build opportunity. Some build understanding. Some simply choose to leave their work better than they found it. Each may appear small on its own. Together, they become the character of a nation.

Today, India is still becoming. Not because the work of previous generations is incomplete, but because every generation receives the privilege of adding its own page. That page does not ask to be perfect. It asks to be meaningful. History tells us who wrote the previous chapters.

Who is writing the next chapter of India?

15 August 1947

Freedom gave us a beginning.

15 August 2026

Every generation inherits more than a nation. It inherits an unfinished story shaped by those who came before, strengthened by those who walk beside us, and entrusted to those who will come after us. What we receive is not merely a legacy to preserve, but an opportunity to leave something of lasting value behind. No contribution is ever too small, for it becomes part of a story far greater than any one lifetime. Long after our names are forgotten, what we choose to build, improve and pass on will continue in the lives of those who inherit the next page.

No 673

Before Freedom Was Won, It Was Written

How a handful of writers, editors and reformers helped shape the conversation that became a nation.

A few days before Independence Day, our neighbourhood colony had begun preparing for the celebrations. Children rehearsed patriotic songs while volunteers and organisers were discussing the arrangements and where the tricolour would be placed. It was a scene that unfolds across India every August. A familiar ritual that quietly reminds us of a shared past.

As conversations drifted from one topic to another, someone asked the children a simple question.

“Who are the heroes of India’s freedom struggle?”

Hands shot up immediately.

“Mahatma Gandhi”
“Bhagat Singh”
Subhas Chandra Bose!”
“Jawaharlal Nehru”

The answers came without hesitation. The children smiled with confidence, proud of the names they had learned in school.

An elderly gentleman, who had been listening quietly from a nearby bench, smiled too. After a brief pause, he said, “History remembers the leaders who stood at the front of the movement. But every movement is also carried forward by countless people who never expected history to remember them”.

The conversation soon moved on. Mine did not.

Not because I believed history had forgotten its heroes.

How does an idea become a movement?

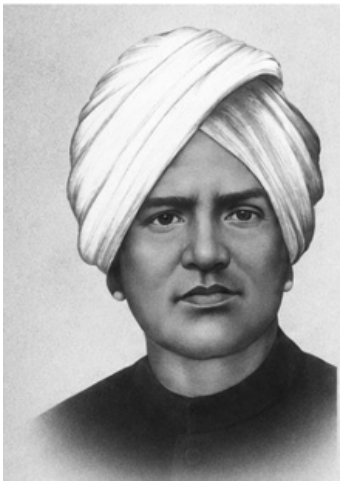
After all, revolutions do not begin on the day people gather in the streets. They begin much earlier, in homes, classrooms, libraries, community halls and around newspaper columns where ordinary people first encounter extraordinary ideas.

Before India was written into history as an independent nation, it was first written into the minds of its people, one newspaper, one essay, one journal, one book and one courageous idea at a time.

That question became a journey.

The deeper I travelled into the history of India's freedom movement, the more often the trail led me, not to battlefields or political assemblies, but to modest printing presses, editorial rooms, libraries and publishing houses. It led me to people who understood that before citizens could fight for freedom, they first had to imagine it.

The first name waiting at the beginning of that journey was Pandithar Iyothee Thass.



Born in 1845 in the Madras Presidency, Iyothee Thass was a Siddha physician, scholar, writer and pioneering social reformer. Yet the more I read about him, the clearer it became that medicine was only one part of his life's work. He believed that societies, like individuals, could also be healed, and that ideas were often the most powerful medicine.

At a time when millions were denied dignity because of caste, Iyothee Thass chose not to remain silent. In 1891, he established the Dravida Mahajana Sabha, creating a platform to advocate for the rights and representation of oppressed communities.

Later, through the Sakya Buddhist Society, he encouraged many to rediscover Buddhism as a path to equality, self-respect and social justice.

But it was through journalism that his ideas travelled the farthest.

In 1907, he founded the Tamil weekly Oru Paisa Tamizhan. True to its name, the newspaper cost only one paisa, making it accessible to ordinary readers rather than an educated elite. Within its pages were discussions on education, history, religion, literature, caste and justice. It questioned beliefs that had remained unquestioned for generations and invited readers to examine society through the lens of equality rather than inherited hierarchy.

Iyothee Thass understood something remarkably simple yet profoundly important. Political freedom would mean little if millions of Indians continued to live without dignity. Long before independence became a national demand, he was asking a more fundamental question.

What does freedom mean to those who have never been treated as equals?

His newspaper did more than report events. It challenged minds. It encouraged people to question accepted truths. Most importantly, it reminded countless readers that self-respect was not something to be granted by society. It was something they already possessed.

As I closed another book on his life, one thought refused to leave me. Perhaps every great movement begins this way. Not with crowds. But with one uncomfortable question. Yet another question soon followed.

If ideas could restore dignity, how did they leave the printed page and enter public life?

The answer took me west, into the princely state of Travancore, where another journalist had discovered that newspapers could do more than educate. They could mobilise. That journey led me to T. K. Madhavan.

Born in 1885, Madhavan belonged to a generation that believed journalism carried responsibilities beyond reporting events. As a journalist associated with the newspaper Deshabhimani, he used the written word to expose social inequalities and encourage civic participation. His editorials were not merely observations on society; they were invitations for society to change itself.

For Madhavan, journalism was never an end in itself. Every article was meant to move beyond the newspaper. Every debate was meant to reach the streets.

At a time when caste-based restrictions denied many people access to public roads surrounding temples, he emerged as one of the strongest voices demanding equality in public life. Through years of writing, organising and public engagement, he helped shape the public opinion that eventually culminated in the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924, one of the earliest organised movements against untouchability in India.

The movement is often remembered for the national leaders who later supported it. What is sometimes forgotten is that before marches could begin, minds had to change. That work had already begun in newspapers. Every editorial questioned an old custom. Every article challenged another assumption. Every reader became a participant in a larger conversation. The printed page had become the first public meeting.

Reading about Madhavan made me realise that ideas rarely transform society on their own. Someone must carry them into everyday life.

Dignity had found its voice through Iyothee Thass. Madhavan showed how that voice could become collective action. But movements face another challenge. They cannot survive on moments of courage alone. They survive because conversations continue long after protests end. That thought led me to another newspaper. Another editor. Another quiet architect of public opinion. Mithavaadi Krishnan.

Working during a period when journalism was steadily shaping public discourse in Kerala, Mithavaadi Krishnan believed that newspapers were more than carriers of news.

They were spaces where society could think aloud. Through the weekly Mithavadi, he encouraged readers to engage with questions of education, social reform, civic responsibility and equality. His journalism did not rely on sensationalism or fiery rhetoric. Instead, it relied on something more enduring.

Reason.

Every issue became an invitation to discuss rather than simply agree. To question rather than merely accept. To participate rather than remain silent. As I read through accounts of his work, I realised that newspapers had begun serving a purpose far greater than informing readers about events. They were creating communities of thought.

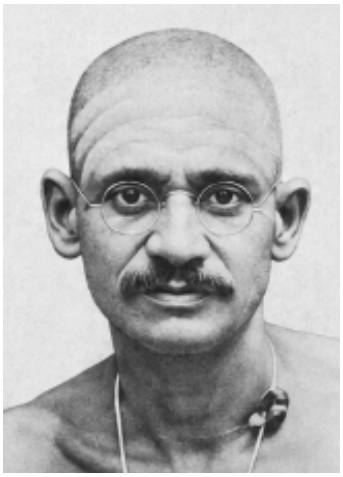
People separated by villages, occupations and backgrounds found themselves participating in the same discussions without ever meeting one another. The newspaper became a public square without walls. By now, I had stopped following individual personalities. I was following ideas.

Iyothee Thass had shown how journalism could restore dignity. T. K. Madhavan had shown how it could inspire public action. Mithavaadi Krishnan revealed something equally important.
Ideas survive because people continue talking about them.

That conversation, quietly unfolding across newspapers in different languages, was slowly preparing a nation to imagine itself differently. And yet, one question remained.

Newspapers created awareness. Debates shaped public opinion. Movements inspired change. But how could those ideas survive beyond a single generation?

The answer, I would soon discover, lay not only in newspapers, but in books, journals and literature itself.



That led me north-west, into present-day Karnataka, where I encountered the life of Hardekar Manjappa. Until then, I had been following newspapers. With Manjappa, I found myself surrounded by books.

Born in 1906, Hardekar Manjappa would later be remembered as a freedom fighter, political thinker, social reformer, writer and journalist so deeply influenced by Gandhian ideals that many came to call him the "Gandhi of Karnataka." Yet what fascinated me most was not the title people gave him. It was the way he believed literature itself could become an instrument of nation-building.

His journey with the written word had begun remarkably early. Along with his brother, he helped

establish the Kannada weekly Dhanurdhari, using journalism to carry nationalist ideas to Kannada readers at a time when the freedom movement was steadily gathering momentum across the country. But newspapers were only the beginning.

He believed ideas deserved a longer life than headlines could offer.

In 1919, he wrote one of the earliest biographies of Mahatma Gandhi in Kannada, introducing countless readers to Gandhian philosophy in their own language. Over the decades that followed, he authored more than forty books on Mahatma Gandhi, Basavanna, Buddhism, non-violence and social reform. Through the Rashtra Jeevana Granthamale, a series of affordable publications, he sought to place literature into the hands of ordinary people, convinced that knowledge should never remain the privilege of a few.

Reading about Manjappa changed the direction of my journey once again. Until now, I had believed newspapers carried ideas across society. Manjappa reminded me that books carried them across generations.

A newspaper may shape today's conversation. A book shapes tomorrow's memory. His work reflected a quiet but profound faith that democracy could never survive on political freedom alone. It required informed citizens, thoughtful readers and communities willing to keep learning long after independence had been won.

The further I travelled through his writings, the clearer one truth became. Freedom is not preserved by monuments. It is preserved by minds. And minds are built one page at a time.

By now, the journey no longer felt like an exploration of five remarkable individuals. It felt like watching different streams slowly merge into the same river. One stream restored dignity. Another inspired action. A third sustained conversation. A fourth preserved ideas for generations. Yet one final question remained. How do all these conversations, taking place in different languages and different regions, eventually become a national conversation?

That answer awaited me in Andhra.

It awaited me in the pages of a newspaper that would connect thousands of readers who would never meet one another. It awaited me in the life of Kasinathuni Nageswara Rao.

Born in 1867, Kasinathuni Nageswara Rao was one of the pioneers of modern Telugu journalism. While his achievements as the founder of Amrutanjan brought him commercial success, it was his investment in journalism that would leave a lasting imprint on India's public life.

In 1908, he founded Andhra Patrika.

It began as a weekly newspaper from Bombay before eventually growing into one of the most influential Telugu newspapers of its time.

To many readers, it was simply a newspaper. To Nageswara Rao, it was something far greater. It was a bridge. At a time when Telugu-speaking people were scattered across the Madras Presidency and other parts of India, Andhra Patrika created something they had never truly possessed before: a shared public space. Its pages carried reports from the freedom movement, discussions on education, literature, language, social reform and political developments from across the country. Readers living hundreds of kilometers apart found themselves reading the same editorials, debating the same questions and slowly imagining themselves as participants in the same national story. The newspaper did not merely distribute information. It distributed belonging.

As railway lines expanded across India, bundles of newspapers travelled from one town to another, carrying with them not only news but conversations. Every edition connected villages with cities, readers with reformers, local concerns with national aspirations. It struck me then that none of the people I had encountered on this journey had worked together. They belonged to different regions. They spoke different languages. They addressed different audiences. Some wrote newspapers. Some edited journals. Some published books. Some built institutions. Yet every one of them believed in the same extraordinary idea that ordinary people deserved access to knowledge, that ideas should never belong only to the powerful, and that public conversation was not a luxury. It was the foundation of democracy itself.

Looking back, I realised my journey had never really been about discovering forgotten personalities. It had been about discovering the invisible architecture of India's freedom movement.

We often imagine history being shaped by dramatic moments, marches, speeches, protests and sacrifices. Those moments undoubtedly changed the course of the nation. But long before they captured public attention, quieter revolutions were already underway. A newspaper costing one paisa was restoring dignity. Editorials were preparing people to challenge injustice. Weekly journals were teaching communities to reason together. Books were preserving ideas beyond a single generation. Newspapers travelling across provinces were transforming regional conversations into a national one.

The freedom movement did not emerge from a single place. It emerged from thousands of conversations taking place simultaneously across the country, conversations that slowly taught people to question, to think, to imagine, to participate and, ultimately, to believe.

A few days later, I saw him again.
It was an ordinary morning in the neighbourhood park. The walking track was alive with familiar faces, birdsong filled the air, and the first rays of sunlight filtered through the trees. As we crossed paths, we recognised each other instantly. We paused for a moment, exchanged a smile and continued walking in opposite directions.

For a brief second, I thought about stopping him and telling him everything I had discovered over the past few days, about the newspapers that carried ideas farther than anyone imagined, the editors who challenged society with words instead of weapons, the writers who quietly reshaped public thought, the publishers who preserved those ideas, and the reformers who believed that knowledge belonged to everyone.

But I didn't. Because I no longer needed to. His words from that evening returned to me.

History remembers those who stood at the front. But every movement is also carried by people who rarely appear in history books."

This time, I didn't simply remember those words.
I understood them.

History rightly celebrates the leaders who stood at the forefront of India's freedom struggle. Their courage inspired millions and altered the destiny of a nation. Yet alongside those familiar names stood countless writers, editors, publishers, teachers and reformers who worked with quieter tools, printing presses instead of podiums, books instead of banners, editorials instead of slogans. They did not always lead the marches, but they helped shape the minds of those who did.

Before India became an independent nation, it first became a conversation.

And among those who ensured that conversation continued across languages, regions, and generations were Pandithar Iyothee Thass, T. K. Madhavan, Mithavaadi Krishnan, Hardekar Manjappa, and Kasinathuni Nageswara Rao.

From Slogans to Silence

How people define Azadi.

By the time we reached the protest ground, the loudest voices had already begun to fade. Volunteers worked quietly, folding banners that only moments earlier had been held high above a sea of raised hands. Placards were stacked into neat piles. Small groups lingered in conversation before drifting away in different directions. A few journalists packed away their cameras, satisfied that they had captured the speeches, the slogans and the crowd. Police personnel, no longer standing in rigid lines, spoke among themselves as normalcy reclaimed the place.

The story, it seemed, had ended. Or so we thought.

Near the edge of the ground, an abandoned banner lay folded over itself. It had probably slipped from someone's hand during the dispersal, unnoticed in the slow departure of hundreds of people. A young boy, no older than fifteen, spotted it before anyone else did. Curious, he bent down, shook off the dust and lifted it onto his shoulder. His friend laughed, stepped back and took a photograph on his phone. As the fabric settled across the boy's back, one handwritten word became clearly visible.

AZADI *(Freedom)*.

Every reporter present had spent the day asking what the protest meant to those who had marched. We found ourselves wondering something different. What did that word mean to the generation that would inherit it?

"A slogan ends with a protest. A question begins after it."

The boy and his friend walked ahead, disappearing into the crowd leaving the venue. We followed, not because they were part of the protest, but because they had unknowingly carried away its last remaining symbol. The banner had become less of a political statement and more of a question waiting for its next answer.

The first voices we encountered belonged to a group of college students gathered just 100 feet away. The intensity of the protest had already given way to familiar conversations about examinations, internships and weekend plans. When we asked what Azadi meant to them, there was a brief silence, followed by smiles that suggested they had never really thought about the word beyond the slogans they had heard.

One student shrugged before saying that freedom meant being trusted to make his own decision. He spoke about choosing a career without every conversation becoming a negotiation with his family. Beside him, another laughed that her definition was far less philosophical. She wanted to

travel with friends without receiving a stream of phone calls asking where she was, who she was with and when she would be back. The others laughed in agreement. Their answers carried the easy confidence of youth, where freedom often begins with choices that older generations consider ordinary.

Listening to them, it became clear that Azadi was no longer confined to public squares or political speeches. For these students, it had quietly entered everyday life. It lived in classrooms, family dining tables, hostel rooms and late-night parties, conversations they were only beginning to imagine. Their aspirations were deeply personal, yet familiar enough to belong to an entire generation trying to define adulthood on its own terms.

A young delivery rider, who had been waiting nearby to deliver an order, had been listening without intending to join the conversation. Still wearing his delivery bag, he smiled politely before offering his own meaning of the word.

"My mother should be able to buy groceries without calculating every rupee before putting something into the bag."

No one interrupted him.
The conversation, which had moments earlier been filled with light-hearted laughter, suddenly found a quieter rhythm. There was nothing dramatic in what he had said. It was not a slogan. It was not even a dream of extraordinary success. It was simply the hope that financial insecurity would one day stop dictating the smallest decisions inside his home.

His words lingered long after he had finished speaking. They reminded us that freedom is often measured not by the rights we celebrate, but by the burdens we no longer carry. For some, it is the liberty to choose. For others, it is the dignity of not having to count every expense before making it.

As our conversation continued, a few more people who had been standing nearby slowly joined the circle. No one announced themselves. No one waited to be interviewed. They listened, reflected and added their own meaning to a word.

A young woman stood quietly for a moment before saying that she hoped the day would come when people remembered her name before asking about her surname. Another spoke about how ordinary decisions like where to study, where to work, often became complicated simply because she was expected to justify choices that her brother never had to explain. Neither spoke with anger. Their words carried the calm certainty of experiences repeated so often that they no longer needed emphasis

"Freedom is rarely one destination; it is a thousand ordinary journeys unfolding at the same time."

Standing a little apart from the group was a transgender woman who had listened throughout the conversation without saying much. When someone eventually asked what Azadi meant to her, she answered in a single sentence.

"The day I can introduce myself without having to explain myself."
Nothing more needed to be said.

For a few moments, the conversation rested in silence. Not the uncomfortable silence that follows disagreement, but the thoughtful kind that arrives when words have already done everything they needed to do.

We resumed walking. The protest ground was now well behind us, but the question had refused to stay there. It had travelled with us, quietly gathering new meanings from people who had never planned to be part of the same story.

The road ahead was quieter now. The banners had disappeared from sight, and the conversations around us had returned to the rhythm of everyday life. Yet the word we had set out to understand refused to remain where the protest had left it. It had slipped into ordinary exchanges, revealing itself not through slogans but through lived experience. The further we walked, the less Azadi sounded like a demand made to a nation and the more it resembled a quiet negotiation each individual carried within.

A short distance away, a tea stall had become an unplanned meeting point. Some people who had attended the protest stopped there before heading home. Others had wandered in from nearby shops and offices, unaware of what had unfolded a little earlier. Nobody seemed in a hurry. It was the kind of place where conversations rarely began with introductions and often ended with strangers knowing a little more about one another.

"The true measure of freedom is not what we demand from society, but what we make possible for the next person."

Our question found another audience.

A middle-aged businessman, stirring his tea absent-mindedly, said freedom had acquired a different meaning after he started employing people instead of working for someone else. He no longer measured success by the income he earned but by whether the people who depended on him could return home each month with financial certainty. A schoolteacher standing beside him smiled in agreement before adding that she hoped her students would grow up believing that disagreement did not have to become hostility. In every classroom, she said, the ability to listen was becoming just as important as the courage to speak.

Nearby, a corporate professional reflected on a quieter struggle. She admitted that despite years of experience, there were still meetings where she felt compelled to prove she deserved a seat at the table before anyone would listen to what she had to say. Across from her, a father watched his two children chasing each other along the pavement. He said little, but when he finally spoke, his answer carried the weight of someone measuring life in generations rather than years. Freedom, he said, was knowing his children would inherit opportunities that had never existed for him.

The conversation moved easily from one person to another, not because everyone agreed, but because every answer seemed to expand the meaning of the question. No one tried to define Azadi for anyone else. There was no attempt to decide whose understanding was more important or more complete. Instead, the word slowly revealed itself as something deeply personal, shaped by circumstance, responsibility and hope. It was remarkable how a single handwritten word on a forgotten banner had become large enough to hold so many different lives.

Leaning against a police vehicle parked a little away from the tea stall stood a constable who had spent the day managing the crowd. His uniform still carried the dust of long hours on duty. We hesitated before approaching him, unsure whether he would want to speak after what must have been an exhausting day. He listened patiently to the question, looked down the road for a moment and answered without hesitation.

"If I reach home before my daughter falls asleep, that's freedom for me."

There was no rhetoric in his voice. No attempt to make his answer memorable. Yet it lingered in the silence that followed. We often imagine freedom as something achieved through extraordinary events, but for him it rested in a moment so ordinary that most people would overlook it, the chance to return home while his daughter was still awake enough to tell him about her day.

As we stood there, an elderly man who had been listening from a nearby bench slowly folded his newspaper and joined us. He had heard enough of the conversation to understand the question before it was asked again.

"When I was young," he began, "we thought freedom meant changing the country. Later, we realised it also meant changing our lives. Now I think every generation fights for its own freedom."

He paused, watching the traffic move steadily past.

"But the greatest generation is not the one that fights the hardest. It is the one that makes sure the next generation doesn't have to fight the same battle."

No one responded immediately. There was nothing to add. People walked away in different directions, carrying nothing more than cups of unfinished tea, bags slung over their shoulders and conversations that would probably continue long after this evening had ended.

We had arrived expecting to report on a protest. We left having witnessed something quieter and, perhaps, more enduring. The loudest voices had belonged to the demonstration, but the deepest meanings had emerged only after the applause had faded. Somewhere between a forgotten banner, a group of students, a delivery rider, a teacher, a father, a constable and an old man, Azadi had become less of a slogan and more of a mirror.

Every person we met saw something different reflected in it.

Perhaps that is the true strength of the word. It refuses to belong to any one movement, ideology or generation. It survives because it continues to be redefined by ordinary people living ordinary lives.

Long after the protest had ended, that conversation was still walking with us. And perhaps, in one form or another, it always will.

"Some words become history because they are remembered. Others become timeless because every generation gives them a new meaning."

నేరేడ్‌మెట్ పోలీస్ స్టేషన్
NEREDMET POLICE STATION
RACHAKONDA
POLICE

Preserving Freedom

The Neredmet Police Station through the eyes of the people it serves.

Every Independence Day, India pauses to remember the sacrifices that secured its freedom. We honour the men and women who stood for the nation when history demanded extraordinary courage, remembering that the independence we celebrate today was earned through resilience, conviction, and sacrifice. That freedom remains one of our greatest inheritances. Yet every Independence Day also leaves us with another thought. Freedom is not only something a nation wins. It is also something a nation must preserve.

Most of us do not experience freedom through constitutional provisions or national ceremonies. We experience it in ways so ordinary that we rarely stop to notice them. It is a child cycling to school on a weekday morning, a shopkeeper lifting the shutters before sunrise, office-goers boarding the first metro, families celebrating festivals in crowded streets, an ambulance finding its way through traffic, and neighbours ending another peaceful evening believing tomorrow will be much the same. These moments seldom become news because nothing extraordinary has happened. Yet perhaps that is the greatest measure of a free society, not the absence of challenges, but the quiet certainty that ordinary life can continue.

Among the institutions that quietly preserve this everyday freedom, the Police occupy a unique place. Mention the word police in any conversation, and the responses are rarely neutral. Some question the system, criticise its functioning, and express frustration over unmet expectations. News headlines often reinforce these perceptions, bringing public attention to moments when policing falls short of what citizens rightly expect.

Yet another reality quietly exists alongside these conversations. It reveals itself when a family cannot find a missing loved one, when a woman feels unsafe on her way home, when an accident turns an ordinary day into uncertainty, or when an unexpected phone call changes everything. In those moments, something changes. People stop debating the institution and start looking for it. They search for the nearest police station, the nearest officer in uniform, or dial the emergency helpline believing someone will respond.

That contradiction became the starting point of our journey.

We wanted to understand this relationship beyond opinions and headlines, not through statistics or official reports, but by observing an ordinary working day. That journey led us to the Neredmet Police Station in Hyderabad, Telangana.

Around 11:30 on a weekday morning, we walked through the gates expecting urgency, raised voices, and constant commotion. Instead, we found something unexpected. There was no chaos, no raised voices, only a calm, steady rhythm. One complaint would conclude and another person would quietly take a seat. Phones rang at regular intervals as officers moved between rooms carrying files, pausing briefly to answer questions before continuing to another desk. Visitors approached one after another, each believing their concern deserved immediate attention and, from their perspective, it did. The station was busy, but it was never disorderly.

The waiting area revealed as much about the station as any official record could. Some people sat quietly, their eyes fixed on the reception desk. Others held folded documents that had clearly been opened and closed several times before their turn arrived. A few spoke softly among themselves, rehearsing what they wanted to say, while others waited in silence. Every face carried a different concern, yet everyone shared the same destination. Watching these interactions, we realised that policing is not always dramatic. More often, it is administrative, conversational, repetitive, and deeply human. The extraordinary often hides inside what appears to be an ordinary working day.

What stood out most, however, was not the paperwork. It was the people.

During the hours we spent there, everyone who entered the station was greeted with the same respect: "Sir" or "Ma'am." A businessman, a lawyer, a college student, a family seeking help to resolve a domestic dispute, people reporting missing persons, and even a hungry stranger who simply needed assistance all walked through the same doors. Their reasons for coming were different, but for those few hours, the uniform appeared to recognise the citizen before it recognised status. Every complaint was different, yet every person was treated with the same dignity. In that simple act, the police were doing more than receiving complaints. They were quietly preserving one of the greatest values of a free society: Equality with Dignity.

Among the many moments we witnessed, one has remained with us ever since. A police officer, seven months pregnant, found herself mediating between two visibly agitated parties. There was no display of authority through intimidation, no raised voice, and no impatience. She listened

carefully, allowed both sides to speak, asked questions, and gradually guided the conversation back towards calm. It was a quiet reminder that the strongest form of authority is often not force, but composure under pressure. Leadership, in that moment, was expressed not through power, but through patience.

As the hours passed, another realisation slowly emerged. For most people, entering a police station is an exception. It is a place they visit only when something has gone wrong. For the officers inside, however, uncertainty is not an interruption to the day; it is the day itself. Every complaint, every visitor, every phone call, and every request becomes part of a continuous routine that begins long before one person arrives and continues long after another leaves. Before one responsibility reaches its conclusion, another has already begun.

As we reflected on everything we had witnessed, another thought quietly emerged. The communities surrounding the station are home to thousands of people, yet only a relatively small number of police personnel stand responsible for serving them. Their numbers may be few, but the confidence they create is immense. Perhaps the true measure of policing is not found only in the strength of its numbers, but in the confidence those numbers inspire.

Even then, one question continued to stay with us. We had spent the morning understanding the police through the people who wear the uniform. But what about the people they serve? Why, despite criticism, differing experiences, and the imperfections that every public institution inevitably carries, do people continue to place their confidence in the police when life becomes uncertain?

The answer, however, was not waiting inside the station. It was waiting just beyond its gates, in a conversation we hadn't expected.

While speaking to a resident outside the police station, we asked him why he had come there. He shared his story without hesitation, explaining the circumstances that had brought him to the station that morning. As the conversation drew to a close, he paused for a brief moment, looked back towards the entrance, and quietly said, *"I didn't know where else to go."*

Those seven words changed the direction of our story.

Until that moment, we believed we had come to understand the police through the people who wear the uniform. Instead, we realised that the story could only be understood through the people who walk towards that uniform when certainty disappears. It was no longer enough to observe the institution from within its walls. To understand its place in society, we also had to understand the people who depended upon it.

Over the following days, we moved beyond the police station and into the neighbourhoods it serves. We met residents from different walks of life, not to ask whether they praised or criticised the police, but to understand why, despite different experiences, they continued to place their confidence in the institution when it mattered most.

The conversations that followed were remarkably different, yet they quietly pointed towards the same truth.

A coffee shop owner spoke about keeping his business open late into the night, confident that customers would return home safely. A parent spoke about children walking to tuition classes every evening. A young professional described returning from work long after sunset, while an elderly resident reflected on decades spent walking the same streets and watching the locality change around him. Their lives were different, their expectations differed, and so did their opinions. Yet beneath those differences lay one remarkable similarity.

They all expected tomorrow to be normal.

It is perhaps one of the least celebrated privileges of living in a peaceful society. Most of us rarely wake up wondering whether we will safely reach work, whether festivals will conclude peacefully, or whether our children will return home unharmed. We simply expect life to continue. We expect roads to remain open, neighbourhoods to remain calm, and public spaces to remain places where ordinary life unfolds without interruption. We seldom describe these expectations as freedom because they have quietly become part of everyday existence.

Perhaps that is what freedom truly looks like.

Not only the freedom secured through history, but the freedom quietly experienced every single day. Freedom, however, does not preserve itself.

While most citizens sleep, someone remains on patrol. Long before the first devotee arrives at a festival, security arrangements have already begun. Before large public gatherings take place, someone has spent weeks planning traffic management, emergency responses, and crowd control. When a distress call is made in the middle of the night, someone answers. When a person

dispute threatens to grow into something larger, someone is expected to intervene before peace is lost. Much of this work remains invisible precisely because it succeeds. A peaceful celebration, a routine commute, or an uneventful evening rarely becomes news, yet they are often the quiet outcomes of countless responsibilities carried out without recognition.

As our conversations continued, another pattern emerged.

The people we met did not describe a perfect institution. Some spoke with appreciation, recalling officers who had helped them during difficult moments. Others shared disappointments and believed there was room for improvement. Many felt that policing, like every public institution, should continue to evolve and remain accountable to the citizens it serves.

Those expectations are not only reasonable; they are essential.

In a democracy, the police are among the most visible representatives of the State. Citizens have every right to question them, demand professionalism, expect fairness, and hold them accountable whenever those standards are not met. Public trust cannot exist without public accountability.

Yet accountability alone does not explain the relationship people have with the police. Expectation does.

The same citizens who criticise the institution are often the very people who instinctively turn towards it when uncertainty enters their own lives. Whether it is a missing person, a road accident, a family dispute, a lost child, or an emergency that cannot wait until morning, there remains a quiet expectation that someone will respond. Long before legal procedures begin or investigations take shape, people seek something far more immediate. They seek reassurance that they are no longer facing the situation alone.

During one of our conversations, a resident offered a comparison that stayed with us long after the interview had ended. *"A temple is only a building until people believe in the deity inside it. A police station is no different. Trust doesn't come from the walls. It comes from the people inside."*

Those words echoed almost every conversation we had throughout the neighbourhoods of Neredmet. People were not placing their confidence in concrete walls, official signboards, or government buildings. They were placing it in the men and women who report for duty each day, knowing that no two days will ever be the same.

By the time our journey came to an end, we realised that we had not written a story about policing in the conventional sense. We had written a story about public confidence. Institutions earn trust not because they are flawless, but because they remain present when ordinary life is interrupted. The confidence with which people live their everyday lives is built upon countless moments they may never witness.

Every nation has borders to protect.
Every city has freedom to preserve.

One responsibility safeguards the sovereignty of the nation. The other helps ensure that the freedoms secured through extraordinary sacrifice continue to be experienced in ordinary life. Neither responsibility is greater than the other. Together, they protect the same idea from different frontiers.

As India celebrates another Independence Day, we will once again remember the heroes whose sacrifices secured the freedom we enjoy today. Their legacy deserves our deepest respect and gratitude. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge those who quietly help preserve that freedom every single day, not through moments that become part of history, but through responsibilities that become part of everyday life.

We arrived at Neredmet Police Station hoping to understand the police. We left understanding something much larger.

A free nation is not defined only by the strength of its borders, but also by the confidence with which its people live within them. Sometimes, the true measure of freedom is not found in extraordinary moments at all. It is found in the quiet certainty that, when uncertainty enters our lives, someone will answer.

This story is dedicated to the countless police personnel who quietly preserve the freedoms we often take for granted, allowing millions to live with confidence, dignity, and hope every single day.

The next chapter is
not waiting to be read.

It is waiting
to be written.

BEYOND NOISE

Voice That Matters

Freedom is not protected only at the nation's borders. It is preserved every day on its streets by those who wear the uniform with courage, duty, and quiet integrity.

Photography: @tkd_goutham

Duty
Honour
Compassion